DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 338 597 SP 033 403

AUTHOR Seldin, Clement A.
TITLE Parent/Teacher Conferencing: A Three Year Study To Enrich Communication.
PUB DATE 91
NOTE 20p.
PUB TYPE Reports - General (140)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Communication Skills; Elementary Education; Elementary School Teachers; Inservice Teacher Education; Interaction Process Analysis; Models; *Parent Teacher Conferences; Program Effectiveness; Surveys; Training Methods; *Workshops
IDENTIFIERS Massachusetts; New Hampshire; Vermont

ABSTRACT

Although much is written about the importance of parent/teacher communication with emphasis on the significant impact of parent/teacher conferences, teachers report a lack of formal training. Neither institutions of higher education nor the public schools appear to provide clear policy and procedure for parent/teacher conferences. Thus, teachers are ill-prepared to organize and manage the conference to ensure maximum effectiveness. Yet, teachers perceive the conference as an instrumental factor in the public school. This 3-year study began with the development of "Interactive Conferencing," a model designed for successful parent/teacher conferencing in the elementary school. Researchers then created a workshop presentation of this model which was presented to 526 elementary school teachers representing 28 schools. Workshops were scheduled 2-4 weeks prior to parent/teacher conferences. Teachers completed a survey to assess prior training in parent/teacher conferencing and teacher beliefs about the importance of this parent/teacher interaction. Basic demographic information was also obtained. From this group, 388 teachers implemented the conferencing model and returned a second survey to assess the usefulness of the model and the perceived impact of "Interactive Conferencing" on parent/teacher conferences. Teachers found the model to be exceptionally helpful because it provided the tools needed to improve significantly the overall quality of the parent/teacher conference. (AMH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED338597

Parent/Teacher Conferencing: A Three Year Study to Enrich Communication

Clement A. Seldin
University of Massachusetts

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

C. Seldin

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

SP 033 403

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

CLEMENT A. SELDIN
University of Massachusetts

Clement A. Seldin, Ed.D. is an Associate Professor at the University of Massachusetts with specialization in teacher education and qualitative evaluation. He has also been a visiting professor at Smith College. He received the highest faculty honor at the University of Massachusetts, the Distinguished Teaching Award and has contributed numerous articles to such publications as Educational Research Journal, Phi Delta Kappan, and Urban Education.

Parent/Teacher Conferencing: A Three Year Study to Enrich Communication

ABSTRACT

Although much is written about the importance of parent/teacher communication while emphasizing the significant impact of parent/teacher conferences, teachers report a lack of formal training. Neither institutions of higher education nor the public schools appear to provide clear policy and procedure for parent/teacher conferences. Thus, teachers are simply ill-prepared to organize and manage the conference to ensure maximum effectiveness. Yet, teachers perceive the conference as an instrumental factor in the public school.

This three-year study began with the development of *Interactive Conferencing*, a model designed for successful parent/teacher conferencing in the elementary school. Researchers then created a workshop presentation of this model which was presented to 526 elementary school teachers representing 28 schools. Workshops were scheduled 2-4 weeks prior to parent/teacher conferences. Teachers completed a survey to assess prior training in parent/teacher conferencing and teacher beliefs about the importance of this parent/teacher interaction. Basic demographic information was also obtained.

From this group, 388 teachers implemented the conferencing model and returned a second survey to assess the usefulness of the model and the perceived impact of *Interactive Conferencing* on parent/teacher conferences. Teachers found the model to be exceptionally helpful. It provided the tools needed to significantly improve the overall quality of the parent/teacher conference.

Parent/Teacher Conferencing: A Three Year Study to Enrich Communication

There has been much written about parent/teacher (P/T) communication. Articles detail how best to communicate with parents about the social, emotional, and academic progress of students. Yet, many of these articles appear in higher education journals that are not likely to be read by practicing educators. Moreover, many are global in scope and not easily translated into a practical framework.

Although there are abundant articles in higher education journals about how to communicate with parents, classroom teachers have infrequent interactions with parents (Wittrock, 1986). This is especially true for students making good progress in school. In gerenal, parents communicate twice during the school year for the obligatory elementary school conference. In the junior and senior high school, conferences often vanish from the list of teacher responsibilities except under unusual circumstances usually regarding discipline problems. Such cases are routinely handled by the school administrator. Yet clearly, the literature reports that parent/teacher conferences are a vital teacher responsibility with broad implications (Berclay, 1977; Losen & Diament, 1978; Rotter & Robinson, 1986; Seldin; Swap, 1987).

There appears to be agreement in the professional literature that parent/teacher communication promotes classroom performance (Berclay, 1977; Losen & Diament, 1978; Rotter & Robinson, 1986; Rubin, Olmstead & Kelly, 1981). Moreover, educators tend to believe that the most effective way to communicate with parents is through the P/T conference (Rotter & Robinson, 1986; Seldin; Swap, 1987).

What are the goals for the P/T conference? Stated succinctly, they are: 1. communicate academic, social, and emotional factors of a child's growth and development in the school; 2. gain information about the child from the parent(s); 3. cooperatively determine reasonable solutions to academic or social/emotional problems; and 4. secure increased parental understanding of the classroom environment and support for the teacher.

Development of Interactive Conferencing

A careful review of 220 research articles published from 1977 to 1987 focused on parent/teacher communication was conducted. Most of the articles were global in perspective. In addition, much of the research neglected to test the various approaches and models. Teachers were not asked to implement the approach in order to judge its effectiveness. Often, the authors speculated on anticipated positive results because the research was based on fundamental and accepted principles of human behavior and education.

Through systematic review of the selected research articles, commonalities surfaced. A detailed approach to conferencing emerged. Next, the approach was reviewed by selected teacher educators, elementary principals, and classroom teachers. Modifications resulted and this eclectic approach to conferencing was completed.

Titled, *Interactive Conferencing*, this system organized the conference into three pivotal areas: Pre-Conference Activity, Conference Activity, and Post-Conference Activity.

I. Pre-Conference activity included personal reflection, physical setting, scheduling, and communication techniques.

II. Conference activity included procedures to build equality and security, professionalism, and parental connections.

III. Post-conference activity included: additional written and oral communication with both parents and students.

After development of *Interactive Conferencing*, a workshop format was designed. It was field tested using three elementary teacher groups (N = 28, 35, 48) in three communities in western and northwestern Massachusetts. Written evaluations were completed by participants following the 3 to 3 1/2 hour workshops and follow-up telephone interviews with selected teacher participants were used to help further strengthen the workshop presentation.

While it is not within the scope of this paper to detail all aspects of the conferencing approach, some discussion is useful. (A comprehensive discussion of the conferencing system will be published in Capstone Journal of Education.)

Throughout the workshop, the following fundamental beliefs served as an umbrella under which teacher participants learned about, and participated in, *Interactive Conferencing*:

1. The P/T conference can have a significant positive affect on a student's academic and social/emotional success in school.

2. The P/T conference can have a significant positive affect on a teacher's ability to help children learn.

3. The P/T conference can have a significant positive affect on both a teacher and student's satisfaction in school.

In addition, the following elements should guide all P/T conferences:

1. Parents are guests at a conference and should be perceived as partners.

2. Teachers must seek ways to build parental security and equality.

3. Teachers must be professional.

4. Parents can be a teacher's best allies.

5. Responsibility for the success or failure of the conference rests with the teacher.

During the workshops, attention was focused on how the school creates a powerful psychological barrier for many parents. In the school building, parents often revert to

childhood roles as students. Moreover, traditional student/teacher relationships may then emerge. Some teachers may become instructional or authoritarian in communicating to parents. Many factors may influence this phenomenon such as how the teacher initially communicates information about conferences to parents; how the teacher prepares for the conference; how the teacher greets and interacts with the parents; and how the teacher listens to the parents.

Consider one element and its potential affect on the dimensions of this psychological barrier--seating plan. Many teachers choose to sit behind their desks during a conference. The parent is directed to the seat(s) along side of the grand teacher's desk. This often creates a perceived inequality that has negative impact on the perceptions of the parent(s). It is easy to understand how some parents may revert to childhood roles.

Other teachers ask parents to sit with them around a rectangular or round table. Yet, too often, the teacher places him/herself on one side of the table and the parents on the other. A "power arrangement" like this may drive some parents to adopt a permissive, meek posture which may be similar to their former relationships with elementary teachers. Thus, something as simple as seat plan may influence the range of conference success.

Strategies to reduce this formidable barrier were presented during the workshop. Teacher participants were provided with hand-outs that reinforced and clarified elements of the workshop. Importantly, teacher participants were asked to adopt *Interactive Conferencing*

during their P/T conferences scheduled within a 2-4 week period following the workshop.

This study was aimed at providing preliminary answers to a series of questions: to what extent would participation in a workshop on *Interactive Conferencing* help teachers to be more effective conferencers? Are some elements of *Interactive Conferencing* perceived as more useful to teachers than others and why? To what extent do teachers find their teacher training programs helpful in preparation for P/T conferences? To what extent do teachers receive school or school system guidelines or strategies for conferencing?

Method

Subjects

Five hundred and twenty-six (526) elementary teachers (K-12) in public schools from communities in Massachusetts, Vermont, and New Hampshire served as subjects for the study. Teaching experience ranged from 1 year to 27 years (mean = 10 years). Teacher participants included 436 females (82.9%) and 90 males (17.1 %). Twenty-eight (28) schools were represented.

Procedure

Workshops were conducted with twelve groups containing 26 to 94 teachers/participants. Workshops were presented in school classrooms, cafeterias, and auditoria. All workshops were conducted by one researcher and followed a standardized approach--lecture, discussion, group activities, group competition, large group sharing and analysis. Overhead transparencies were

used and informational packets detailing successful strategies and procedures were provided to all teacher participants. Workshops were conducted 2-4 weeks prior to P/T conferencing by teacher participants during the fall and spring, 1987-1990.

Teacher participants were first asked to complete a short questionnaire called SURVEY I on which training was defined as specific detailed discussion, explanation, or analysis of parent/teacher conferencing. Teacher participants were asked: 1. the extent of training on P/T conferencing provided by their teacher education program in college; 2. the extent of guidelines or strategies they received on P/T conferencing from their school or school system; and 3. the degree to which they perceived P/T conferencing to be worthwhile. Questions 1 and 2 utilized a 5 point Likert-type scale from "No Training" (1) to "Very Large Amount of Training" (5). Space was provided for teacher participants to "Comment." The 5 point scale was also applied for question 3 with "Not Worthwhile" (1) to "Extremely Worthwhile" (5) and space to "Comment." Teachers were not asked to identify themselves on the form although they were asked to identify basic information on gender, years experience, their school name and school address.

To determine the perceived usefulness of *Interactive Conferencing*, teacher participants were given a one-page questionnaire at the conclusion of the workshop. Called SURVEY II, it asked teacher/participants to complete the survey after their next series of P/T conferences. Teacher participants were asked to seal (fold and staple) their completed questionnaire and deliver it to their school principal. Concurrently, letters were sent to the school principals of

teacher participants explaining the study and requesting that principals collect the sealed questionnaires and forward them in an enclosed stamped self-addressed envelope. Twenty-four (24) principals received this letter (four principals administered two schools each). To those who did not return the materials, follow-up letters were sent to remind principals of the study and the importance of collecting teacher forms and forwarding them for analysis.

Results

Analysis of both qualitative and quantitative measures was completed. Frequency counts and per cents were calculated for both Survey I and II. Teacher/participant comments were organized and recorded.

SURVEY I

TABLE 1

P/T Conference Training Provided for Teacher Participants during their Pre-Service Teacher Education Program (Likert-type scale from 1 (No Training) to 5 (Very Large Amount of Training)

1	2	3	4	5
No Training	Little Training	Moderate Amount of Training	Large Amount of Training	Very Large Amount of Training
457 (86.9%)	39 (7.4%)	7 (1.3%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

As illustrated in Table 1, 86.9% (457) of the teacher participants indicated they had "No Training" in parent/teacher conferencing in their pre-service teacher education program. In addition, 7.4% (39) claimed they had "Little Training." Only 7 teacher participants of 526 (1.3%) indicated they had a "Moderate Amount of Training." No teacher participants reported either "Large Amount of Training" or "Very Large Amount of Training" received in college. 23 (4.4%) teacher participants did not complete the question.

TABLE 2

P/T Conference Guidelines and/or Strategies Receiving by Teacher Participants from their School or School System (Likert-type scale from 1 (No Training) to 5 (Very Large Amount of Training)

1	2	3	4	5
No Training	Little Training	Moderate Amount of Training	Large Amount of Training	Very Large Amount of Training
430 (81.7%)	82 (15.6%)	4 (0.8%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

As illustrated in Table 2, 81.7% (430) of the teacher participants claimed that their school or school system provided "No Training" in parent/teacher conferencing. Another 15.6% (82) reported they had "Little Training." Only 4 teacher participants (0.8%) indicated they had a "Moderate Amount of Training." No teacher participants reported either "Large" or "Very Large Amounts of Training" provided by their school or school system. 10 (1.9%)

teacher participants did not complete the question.

As reflected in Table 3, almost 8 out of 10 teacher participants (77.9%) reported that P/T Conferences are "Worthwhile", "Very Worthwhile", or "Extremely Worthwhile." Opposing this were the 7.8% (41) who claimed P/T Conferences were "Not Worthwhile" and 14.3% (75) who maintained Conferences are only "Somewhat Worthwhile."

TABLE 3

Teacher Participants' Perception of P/T Conferencing as a Worthwhile Activity (Likert-type scale from 1 (Not Worthwhile) to 5 (Extremely Worthwhile)

1	2	3	4	5
Not Worthwhile	Somewhat Worthwhile	Worthwhile	Very Worthwhile	Extremely Worthwhile
41 (7.8%)	75 (14.3%)	282 (53.6%)	102 (19.4%)	26 (4.9%)

SURVEY II

Of the 526 teacher participants in workshops, SURVEY II forms from 405 teacher participants were returned by school principals. 388 teacher participants (73.8%) reported that they adopted *Interactive Conferencing* at their most recent series of P/T conferences. 17 (3.2%) teacher participants reported that they were unable or unwilling to use *Interactive Conferencing* during their parent/teacher conferences.

TABLE 4

Mean Rating of Teacher Participant Responses to the Usefulness of Eight Key Workshop Elements (Likert-type scale from 1 (Not Useful) to 5 (Extremely Useful)

PRE-CONFERENCE	Personal Reflection	4.3
	Consideration of Physical Setting	4.6
	Flexible Scheduling	4.4
	Communication Techniques with Parents	4.7
CONFERENCE	Organization of Materials	4.5
	Communication Strategies with Parents	4.8
POST-CONFERENCE	General Letter to Parents	4.4
	Follow-up Telephone Communications	4.5

As illustrated in Table 4, the three major components of *Interactive Conferencing* had mean ratings between 4.3 ("Personal Reflection") and 4.8 ("Communication Strategies with Parents") on the 1-5 Likert-type scale. The mean rating for all eight categories across the three major workshop components was 4.5

An important final question asked, "What impact, if any, did the workshop on *Interactive Conferencing* have on the overall quality of your parent/teacher conferences? On a 1-5 Likert-type scale from 1 (No Impact) to 5 (Major Positive Impact), the mean rating was 4.6

DISCUSSION

Clearly the teachers in this study had little formal training in P/T conferencing. Almost 9 teachers in 10 (86.9%) claimed their teacher education programs provided "No Training." In addition, 8 of 10 teachers (81.7%) reported that their schools and/or school systems provided "No Training" as well. Thus, teachers are left to develop their own system of conferencing. Representative of the written comments of many teachers was a New Hampshire teacher who stated, *"Training, are you kidding? My Teacher Ed. Program didn't even mention conferencing as something I would have to do!"* Another teacher from Massachusetts reported, *"I think one professor once said something about conferences but I don't remember. And that was only 3 years ago!"* Many teachers wrote that they developed a personal approach to conferencing from informal discussions with colleagues in teachers' rooms. As one Massachusetts teacher claimed, *"Without my friend teaching next door, I would have been lost. What I learned about conferencing, I learned from her.*

But it was a little like the blind leading the blind."

Despite the importance of the P/T conference, in terms of potentially enhancing social, emotional, and academic factors of a child's growth and development, teachers are simply ill--prepared to structure the interaction to maximize effectiveness. Apparently, teacher education programs and most school systems keep P/T conferencing "on the back burner" in terms of formal training.

P/T conferencing is a worthwhile activity according to the vast majority of teachers. In fact, 77.9% (410) rated conferencing as "Worthwhile," Very Worthwhile," or "Extremely Worthwhile." Although inadequate training is offered, teachers believe that conferencing with parents is important. Many written comments were similar to the Vermont teacher who wrote, *"It is great to meet parents and I know [conferencing] can ultimately help their child in my class but I need to know more ways to communicate effectively with them. Conferencing is deceptively simple!"* An accurate assessment.

Perhaps the most significant part of this study relates to how useful teachers found *Interactive Conferencing.* As a workshop designed to help teachers enhance the effectiveness of their P/T conferences, the approach appears to be highly successful. The mean rating of teachers who used the system was 4.5 on the scale from 1 (Not Useful) to 5 (Extremely Useful). When considered in its various parts, *Interactive Conferencing* was rated highly in each component. The strategies presented in the PRE-CONFERENCE,

CONFERENCE, and POST-CONFERENCE appeared to be all relevant and genuinely useful to teachers.

Finally, teachers perceived *Interactive Conferencing* to have a major positive impact on the quality of their conferences. On the 1-5 Likert-type scale from 1 (No Impact) to 5 (Major Positive Impact), the mean rating was 4.6. Comments like the following from a New Hampshire teacher were representative, *"I changed virtually my whole approach to the conference and it worked! Your system gave me the fundamentals and the strategies. I felt so much more satisfied with the entire conference. I could tell by what the parents said and their body language that they were extremely pleased with the new approach. Thank you. Thank you."* A Massachusetts teacher wrote, *"Where were you 10 years ago? Your conferencing approach is dynamite! It should be a requirement in all teacher education programs. I felt it was a true partnership with these parents."*

Providing teachers with the tools they need to be competent educators is essential and basic. It appears that teacher education programs are not including training in what teachers describe as an important and worthwhile teacher responsibility. Schools and school systems apparently neglect this focus as well. Thus, teachers are left to develop their own approach to something that has a significant affect on the teaching/learning experience.

What is integral to a teacher's work should not be left to chance. One 3 hour workshop provided a solid blueprint for an effective conference. It offered a foundation from which

teachers could build productive parent communication for the ultimate benefit of the children. The vaccuum at both the pre-service and inservice levels must be filled.

REFERENCES

Berclay, G. J. (1977). Parent involvement in the schools. A National Education Association Publication.

Wittrock, M. C. (Ed.). (1986). Handbook of research on teaching. (3rd ed.). New York: Macmillan, Inc.

Rotter, J. C., & Robinson, E. H. (1986). Parent-teacher conferencing. A National Education Association Publication. ISBN 0-8106-1057-4

Losen, S. M., & Diament, B. (1978) Parent conference in the schools. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Rubin, R., Olmstead, P., & Kelly, J. (1981). Comprehensive model for child services. Children and Youth Services Review, 3, 175-192.

Seldin, C. A. (in press). The parent/teacher conference: strategies to promote genuine communication. Capstone Journal of Education.

Swap, S. M. (1987). Enhancing parent involvement in the schools. New York: Teachers College Press.